DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 345 JC 860 506

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TITLE The Humanities and the "New Student": Some Possibilities for Social Transformation.
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at "The Social Role of the Community College," a Conference sponsored by Broome Community College and the University Center at Binghamton, State University of New York (Binghamton, NY, October 10-11, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *Community Colleges; Curriculum Development; Educational Change; Educational Needs; Educational Objectives; *Equal Education; *Humanities Instruction; *Liberal Arts; School Responsibility; Student Needs; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, an immersion in the humanities has been available to the children of the elite at selective colleges and universities. The lower classes, if they studied at all, studied vocational subjects, taking few courses in the liberal arts. The community colleges, through their humanities course offerings, can play a democratizing role in higher education. The current socioeconomic opportunity structure is such that the competencies best engendered via the humanities are those required for entry-level positions and ultimate career success. Thus, if the students who begin their higher education at the community college level are to receive both a liberating and a practical education, the humanities must develop an agenda that gives students a realistic chance to begin and develop their careers. Despite a history of low expectations of community college students held by both the students and the college, despite the reputation of community colleges as cooling out tanks or overflow reservoirs for four-year institutions, and despite low faculty enthusiasm about their own dead-end careers, there exists within the community college the potential for a more progressive, inclusive agenda for the humanities. This agenda would focus on multiple forms of humanistic curricular structures appropriate to the "new" students; i.e., full-time, traditional students in career or transfer programs, young adult part-time students seeking degrees or career advancement opportunities, and older students taking courses for personal growth. Humanities curricula must consider the specific needs of these groups and market directly to each. (EJV)

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# THE HUMANITIES AND THE "NEW STUDENT":

# SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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Presented at
"The Social Role of the Community College"
A conference sponsored by
Broome Community College
and the University Center at Binghamton, SUNY
Binghamton, New York
October 10-11, 1986

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# The Humanities and the "New Student": Some Possibilities for Social Transformation

L. Steven Zwerling

## Overview

The issues are stark. The role of education in America is once again undergoing reexamination. This time, officials with substantial power to write and rewrite public policy are questioning the effectiveness of public education. All interventions of the last five decades from open access to bilingualism to pre-school efforts to student aid are under scrutiny--some would claim under threat.

Perhaps no more dramatic and fundamental is the current excellence debate. Critics challenge educators, appropriately, to look at their curricula (they are in "disarray" it is claimed), their general education offerings (they are virtually non-existant it is claimed), at the communication and computational skills of students (in decline it is claimed).

Less often in this debate does one hear voices calling out about issues of equity. Harvard's core curriculum may have undergone reasonably successful revision, but what about predominately-black Lawson Community College's curriculum? The occupational chances may be bright for computer science graduates of the California Institute of Technology, but what are the chances for young people and adults without complete secondary or post-secondary educations?

In earlier decades, those without adequate formal education could find employment in manufacturing, in public works--road building, electrification projects, subway construction. With their muscles and effort, people could provide for themselves, their families--especially for their children by encouraging and enabling them to go to and stay in school.

Today there are few such jobs. The relatively few blue collar jobs still existing are often only open to guild or union members. Even entry level positions in today's service economy require the skills one acquires via schooling--communications and analytical skills, keyboard competency, customer relations skills. Access to better jobs, to careers requires higher-level competencies acquired only via more extensive schooling--computer skills, critical and analytical thinking, a quantitative and technical orientation, interpersonal capacities.

Thus we must pay special attention to the destiny of minority and low socio-economic status people who traditionally get less than an equal share of schooling, especially a less than equal share of the kind of schooling now required for mobility in our information society.

Access is under attack and this certainly needs to be resisted for its own sake. But access in this context is not enough. Excellence is a legitimate issue as well. To gain the skills needed for a chance to be occupationally and personally mobile, both the kind and quality of education counts as much as access to education.

The challenge today is how to synthesize access and excellence and thereby provide people with access to the right kinds of high-quality schooling.

It may not be overly dramatic to say that the success of our democracy may very well rest on how we confront these issues. The failure to do so will doom literally millions of people to live their entire lives outside the mainstream of the economy.

Now how does this relate to my subject? More specifically, how can community colleges, through their humanities offerings, play a

democratizing role in higher education?

In brief, here is an overview of my position: Traditionally, an immersion in the humanities has been available to the children of the elite at selective colleges and universities. The lower classes, if they studied at all, studied vocational subjects. At most they took a course or two in the liberal arts.

Further, though general liberal education has usually been defined by what it is not--not specialized, not vocational, not occupational--it ironically turns out to be of more practical value than vocational studies. Though of course the children of affluence begin with many advantages, a liberal education is a "value-added" education even for them. The current opportunity structure is such that the competencies best engendered via the humanities are the ones required for entry-level positions as well as ultimate career success.

Thus, if the new student clienteles who begin their higher education at the community college are to receive both a liberating and practical education, the humanities must articulate an even more ambitious agenda than currently contemplated as it is only through liberal studies that students can acquire those skills they need to have a realistic chance to begin and then develop careers.

There is also a further agenda for the humanities at community colleges. In addition to this very practical, even politically attractive role, there are more traditional, more intrinsic opportunities for those of us who care about the humanities.

The bottom line here, then, is that the humanities at the two-year college can be very compatible with current bottom-line higher educational realities as well as play a comprehensive role in

in the lives of all students in this most comprehensive of institutions.

First a little background to set the context for this comprehensive mission for the humanities.

The Context

Today's community college barely resembles the junior college of earlier generations. Its mission has expanded; in many ways it has become a new institution. A test of this is the fact that familiar definitions no longer apply. We can no longer seperate the traditional functions of the community college as neatly as in the past--into collegiate, career, compensatory, and community divisions. How does one classify an adult who works full-time and attends intermittently, initially taking skills course and then credit courses in business, getting and A.A.S degree in computer technology, and eventually transferring to a four-year college? In effect this student fits into all four categories.

How many students take two years to complete work in the "two-year college"? How many "transfer students" actually transfer? How many "terminal students" terminate? Why is it that more than half the students who transfer are from among the college's "terminal students"? Why are there now in many places more "reverse-transfers" than "forward transfers"? Clearly the junior college that came into being with an exclusively "college-parallel" curriculum has been transformed.

See if developments of the last decade seem familiar[1]. During the past ten years your college defined its mission as "something for everyone," and in some ways it has become as much a community

center as a community college. Courses in How to Make Jello Molds coexist with others in English Literature.

As a result, the question who should pay for non-credit remedial and continuing education courses has become more of an issue as the source of funding has shifted from the local district to the state legislature. In many states the legislature refuses to support non-credit offerings. Thus, community college have devised strategies to convert as many non-credit courses as possible to credit. The need to offer more remedial courses has also required some adjustments--to keep developmental courses small in size, other courses have felt administrative pressure to swell in enrollments.

As more and more students require financial aid, academic contortions are necessary to design twelve-credit schedules that do not overtax the ability of underprepared students. Credit for high-school level courses, for example, is not uncommon as you have struggled to keep students eligible.

The "traditional" faculty have at times opposed schemes to offer programs off campus or via new modes of instruction--telecourses, correspondence courses, independent study, etc.

To expand enrollments, beyond accepting all who show up for registration, community colleges have become aggressive in their marketing--even setting up information and registration booths in shopping malls. This "marketing approach" has attracted a diverse student clientele. More students are interested in individual courses than integrated programs of study. Some step in and out. Others enroll only once and are never heard from again.

Above all, the institution is obsessed by the numbers. The number of FTEs determines the college's fiscal fate. A new

formulation, "seat time"--course credit enrollments on a single day during the semester--is another measure of success (or failure). And administrative careers are made (or broken) as the FTEs and times-in-seat are tallied. "Bottom-line-think" also has led colleges to depend more and more on less expensive adjunct faculty--now more than half the sections offered are taught by parttimers.

Staff have come to expect students not to complete courses much less full programs of study. In many urban two-year colleges, fewer than five percent of the students who say they aspire to a degree complete that degree. Rarely are advanced-level courses offered. When they are, they are frequently cancelled due to low enrollment. The fact that students may require them for graduation does not always persuade the administraton it is important to run them.

This emphasis on single courses and the diversity of the student body has contributed to the deterioration of coherent curricula--especially the institution's general education offerings. In the absence of well-conceived curricula, many colleges have taken the opportunity to cut their budgets by dis-investing in counseling and academic advising. Why provide advisement when so many students ("enrollees") sign up for individual courses in shopping centers?

This has led to a disheartened faculty. They have come to feel powerless. Their traditional role as shapers of the curriculum is now largely irrelevant. Their traditional role as guardians of the traditions is unappreciated. Many now, protected by the sinecure of tenure, teach and run, feeling disaffiliated from the institution and its goals.

Does this sound at all familiar? As distressing as this may be,

there is still more to say that further darkens the picture. (Though, recall, I promise at the end to speak also about the possibilities available to humanists who want to exert a counterforce within their colleges.)

There are also significant, less well explored, regressive social consequences that are the product of the newly-shaped community college. Since the early 1970s, a few of us who have written critically of the community college movement have claimed that, in spite of its democratic rhetoric, the two-year college has not contributed to the social progress of its students. Quite the opposite. Much data reveals that the very fact of attending a community college is a liability to students' academic and vocational progress when their rates of achievement are compared with academically and socioeconomically equivalent students who begin their studies at a four-year college. There seems to be something in the culture that sadly impedes students' development.[2]

In addition to the colleges' culture intefering with program completion and ultimate transfer, there is also growing evidence that the community college's much vaunted vocational curricula do not do an effective job in preparing even graduates for entry-level positions much less for later career advancement.[3]

Some of us see these institutional "failures" to in fact be an intended part of the two-year college's historical mission. Until recent years when four-year colleges were concerned that there being too many students for them to absorb, community colleges were called upon to "divert" as many students as possible away from local senior institutions. This was in part accomplished through something Burton Clark called "cooling out"--a process whereby the staff of

the two-year college (especially the counseling staff) acted in concert to get as many students as possible to lower their aspirations--to move out of transfer into terminal programs and thereby deflect students away from four-year colleges.[4]

Intended or not, this evidence of institutional ineffectiveness is even more disturbing when one realizes that community colleges are increasingly the college for the disenfranchized. In earlier more progressive years, many four-year colleges made a significant effort to recruit, support, and retain minority students, returning women, the underemployed, students with as yet untapped potential. But as we all know too well, the numbers now tell us that this commitment is largely over; funds are at best scarce. When one then looks within community colleges at the distribution, for example, of white and black students among courses and programs, one finds a disturbing kind of academic tracking with blacks and low-income students for example, under-represented in the higher-status career programs.

Thus, in these various ways, community colleges appear to play a role in the intergenerational reproduction of the social structure--contributing to the maintenance of current inequities rather than their amelioration as all the rhetoric for all these years would suggest.

But there is something further, something ironically democratic about the community college in how it negatively effects all students through the general, pervasive decline in the culture of literacy. This also brings us closer to thoughts about ways in which the humanities can play an important role in the social transformation of the two-year college and its students.

Several recent works that apply the methods of anthropology to the study of the culture of the community college have noted a climate of expectations among students and staff that works against an emphasis on higher order cognitive skills and processes. Rather than expecting and requiring students to be critical, analytical, synthetic, and original in their thinking and communicating, faculty frequently promote passive forms of learning that emphasize an exchange of prepackaged bits of factual information and the procedures of reading and writing.[5]

Lest one is too quick to place all blame on the faculty for this decline in critical literacy, these observers also point out that the students also are not interested in higher learning: Most characteristically they seek only to satisfy the requirements of courses and programs. Thus, it is claimed, students and faculty "conspire" together to "level down" or "remedialize" the academic agenda for the institution.

There are of course ironies within ironies in all of this--the students who come with a practical orientation, seeking schooling for career-related purposes and interested only in meeting course requirements, these students wind up with a fundamentally impractical education (good perhaps at best for short-term results) that excludes those higher-order competencies that most agree are essential to career flexibility and mobility. And the faculty who, through their disciplines and teaching, want to participate in higher education (not just in community service) wind up feeling powerless and demoralized. In this pas de deux everyone loses.

Some Possiblilities for Social Transformation

If what I've described has the ring of familiarity, what role can the humanities play in the retransformation of the contemporary community college? Actually, I'd prefer to phrase the question somewhat differently: What role must the humanities play so that students can experience education as more than simply memorization and recitation? What role must the humanities assume to draw students into the culture of higher learning and therein develop those critical literacy skills that are necessary to personal and professional liberation?

What we need is an agenda for leveling-up institutional expectations. Even the career program faculty know that their students are doomed to deadend jobs if they cannot read, write, and think critically about their work.

This is not just a call for higher standards, which in fact is usually more a euphemism for excluding the underprepared and cooling-out those deemed inappropriately ambitious. My call rather is for an inclusive form of education, centered around liberal studies, for all the "new" students for whom the two-year college is the most available, most realistic option.

There have of course been recent attempts to restore the humanitities to the two-year college. In some states, the legislatures have tied continued funding to the imposition of liberal arts requirements. There is the growth of this organization and the theme of this conference. And there are a number of noteworthy efforts at individual colleges around the country. Too few to be sure, but important to know about--at Miami-Dade, at the Community College of Philadelphia, at Los Medanos.

Unfortunately, however, there are also a number of trends in the humanities that at first appear to be progressive but upon closer examination contribute to more segregation and inequality.

The first of these trends attempts to enrich the humanities experience for students in career programs. On many campuses, faculties are reluctant to institute requirements, knowing that many students will avoid them by taking only career-related courses and then leave college for a job without completing their degrees. The alternative, then to bringing students to humanities courses is to bring the humanities to students in occupational programs. At the State University of New York, they call this the "infusion approach." Via this approach, one finds "humanities modules"--two- to three-week segments inserted into vocational programs: Spanish for medical assistant students, French for restaurant management students, the "Role of the Automobile In American Society" for auto mechanic students, etc.[6] These kinds of modular sections offer the patina of higher learning while avoiding the challenge and rewards of its substance.

A second regressive approach to the "revival" of the humanities adds to the kind of tracking within community colleges mentioned earlier. In recent years, many liberal arts faculties have developed proposals for honors programs as a way to attract and retain higher-ability students. A number of California community colleges, for example, have teamed up with neighboring university centers to launch so-called "redirection programs"--honors programs set in the two-year colleges to attract university applicants who are thereby redirected to the junior college as part of an effort to control enrollment growth in the four-year institutions. These

proposals for honors programs usually include a reallocation of resources away from the broader student body toward these new preferred students--in effect a kind of redirection of resources and concern within the junior colleges from the less-able to the more-able students. Sadly, these proposals usually do not include ways to discover and develop the hidden potential among colleges' traditional student body so that they too might benefit from these enriched programs. More typically, in fact, one finds a growing percentage of the traditional student body confined to "terminal general education" and remedial programs--both largely staffed by the humanities faculty not invited to teach in the emerging honors efforts. These terminal general education programs first appeared in the 1930s and were designed for students who would never go on to the higher learning--junior/senior status at four-year colleges. Though out of favor during the more egalitarian-minded 1960s and 70s, they are now in a state of revival at many community colleges. Ironically, vocational programs used to serve as the lowest track within the junior college with the liberal arts transfer track the most selective. Today the reverse is true with the liberal arts program more and more the place to "hold" students waiting for places to open in the more prestigious career programs. Some would claim that the general education program is often now a new kind of remedial ghetto where cooling out in its classic form takes place--but this time with a new twist as students are cooled-out of their "unrealistic" vocational (rather than academic) ambitions into an ersatz form of the liberal arts.

A more progressive, inclusive agenda for the humanities would take on very different kinds of configuations. In that spirit, what

I propose we consider multiple forms of humanistic study each set in curricular structures that are appropriate in different ways for different kinds of "new" students commonly served by the two-year college--First,full-time traditional age students enrolled in either career or transfer programs; second,young-adult part-time students who return to school to seek degrees and/or enhance their career chances; and finally older adults who enroll periodically, taking courses for recreational or more profoundly intrinsic reasons.

Many traditional-age students begin their undergraduate studies already rather well cooled-out by previous school experiences. Often they have participated in remedial programs. Often they have already been deemed "sparrows" rather than "bluebirds" and have come to see themselves as "destined" for failure or at best marginal forms of academic and vocational achievement. But if we believe that human potential is at least reasonably equally distributed among all peoples, than many of our sparrows are potentially bluebirds.

For these young students the humanities can play a decisive role in their awakening and development. To play a progressive role, curricular structures themselves have to be progressively ordered--it is minimally essential that community colleges commit themselves to offer and run sequential offerings through at least the intermediate level. This is an important institutional symbol of belief in students' movement across the semesters--it shifts the focus from individual courses to courses of study.

With curricular sequences in place, through both the content and methods of their disciplines, humanists can more consciously make a committment to a kind of student involvement that encourages

personal transformation. I am attracted to Jack Mezirow's notion of "perspecitve transformation," a process that leads students to see how they may be trapped in their own histories and may, without a major effort, be destined to relive that history.[7] Carefully considered forms of teaching can help students become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have patterned their lives. In this way their perspectives can be transformed and other possibilities for their lives can manifest themselves.

Another useful approach to what might be called "reconstructive teaching" is Zelda Gamson's elaboration of "liberating education."[8] To be liberating, an education must be rooted in experience. An education that is grounded in students' experiences both validates those experiences and enables students to establish linkages between what they already know and what they need to study. For the disciplines to avoid being merely academic and thereby drive away students, they must "reach down into their (own) struggles with life and show students how these struggles can illuminate what they experience themselves."[9]

This approach does not, however, focus primarily on the self--it moves quickly beyond the self to what others in other historical times and places have experienced and to modes of analysis and understanding. A liberating curriculum, carried out with methodologies designed and committed to students' transformation, "moves back and forth between awareness and application, engagement and detachment."[10] It is an education that seeks to heat-up rather than cool-out. It is also an approach, frankly, that heats-up and transforms the faculty. And it is an education ideally

suited to working with my first group, traditional-age community college students who respond immediately to its personal force and need to experience its transformational power.

For the second group of community college students, young adults who attend part time and seek either degrees or clusters of courses primarily for career-related purposes, for these students the humanities have, in my view, a different role to play. These students often have had some previous college experience; indeed, many so-called "reverse transfer" students already have undergraduate degrees and enroll in two-year colleges for a particular form of specialized education. Most work full time. Many have moved from job to job, seeking more. Some have already come to sense that their education lacks the breadth they now see to be important to their careers and to leading fulfilled lives. To be sure, at this stage in their lives, career interests are still central, but as they attempt to negotiate their way into management positions, they are discovering that those people who are most mobile, who move the fastest, have something in their academic background that is missing in their own. They are ripe, therefore, for an experience in the liberal arts that does at least one of two things--first, either provides a curricular stream that helps them acquire those generic skills that have direct professional application or second, provides a curriculum that enables them to fill in the gaps in their educational background. The first is process rich; the second rich in content.

The fullest expression of the former, the generic-skills or competencies approach, has been the attempt to foster writing across the curriculum. There is a grat deal that is attractive about the

idea of giving as much emphasis to competency as content--especially when working with career-minded adults. But in the traditional approach to a competency-based education, the competencies themselves that undergird the curriculum often seem too abstract and alienating to students with a practical orientation. The traditional list of competencies usually includes "abstract logical thinking," "critical analysis," "historical consciousness," "values," "understanding numerical data," "international and multicultural experiences."[11]

A more attractive approach, hopefully an approach with equivalent integrity, would emphasize a broader range of competencies that are essential to a person's being successful in life--in careers, as citizens, as members of a family. I would organize these in three clusters--<u>intellectual and cognitive skills</u> (logical, critical, analytical thinking; communicatins: verbal, written, non-verbal; information and data acquisition, manipulation, and retrieval; multi-dimensional thinking; values formation; etc.), <u>interpersonal and political skills</u> (decision-making; advocacy and persuasion; subordination, management, and leadership; networking; "getting-along" skills, etc.), <u>personal and affective skills</u> (risk-taking and moxie; flexibility and adaptability; the ability to handle ambiguity, uncertainty, and crisis; human understanding; spontaniety, playfullness, and creativity; self-motivation; self-evaluation, correction, and control; passion and committment, etc.)

Assuming my list of the competencies for success at least gets us started, one then needs to ask which of these are appropriately taught? And which of these are the rightful preserve of the humanities? Most is my answer to both questions.

This approach in both credit and non-credit programs, for both adult students seeking degres and others, serves a progressive, reconstructive agenda as well as going beyond the usual goal of the "basics movement." This list of competencies, laced into liberal studies courses and programs, lifts the usually limited basics approach from something instrumental to something transformational as it gets us all thinking about the actual things that make people powerful and points to ways in which we can teach them to our students.

For that second sub-group of younger, practical-minded adults who wish a content-rich curriculum to fill in gaps in their educational backgrounds, there are also challenges for the humanities faculty. When discussing curricular issues here it is useful to be realistic and acknowledge that these students are not necessarily seeking degrees (quite a few have them already) and most will enroll intermittantly. The usual curricular response is really no response at all--give students the schedule of what's available in any given semester and let them take anything they want. To be fair, no matter what one might construct, this haphazard pattern may still turn out to be the dominant reality. But there are opportunities to educators to provide alternatives.

Humanities programs for intermittant students can consist of related groups of courses that stand alone. These clusters do not necessarily have to be connected to degree programs as many of these students do not seek degrees. They only need to be connected to each other in meaningful ways over a number of semesters--in chronological groupings, around themes, about problems. They can be organized in more or less traditional academic configurations, in

interdisciplinary arrangements, or by genre. None of these forms are mutually exclusive. Successful programs of this kind can be structured according to more than one organizational principle. For example, the theme of "culture" can be approached chronologically through a series of interdisciplinary courses and seminars.

These adults often prefer a problem-centered curriculum in which academic content is framed by issues that are vital to their lives. It is not difficult to shape a series of interdisciplinary humanities courses that over a year or two would trace the human endeavor to consider such issues. History, philosophy, literature, psychology, for example, compatably lend their methods and discoveries to this kind of structure.

The problem-centered approach is also the most progressive as the best issues emerge from the experiences of the students themselves. Adults, we all acknowledge, are different than traditional-age students because of the richness and diversity of their lives. If we can find compelling ways to draw upon that experience in curricular forms carried out in discussion-rich classes, these students at community colleges will discover ways to take more control of their lives.

Malcolm Knowles calls this "andragogy." It is based on the assumptions that adults are self-directing (or at least will become so quickly in the proper learning environment); that adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something; that adults enter an educational activity with a life-centered, task-centered, or problem-centered orientation to learning; that adults are more intrinsically motivated than younger students.[12] These characteristics of adult students make them ideally suited to an

approach to the humanities that seeks to encourage personal transformation.

The third group of student one typically encounters at community college is the older adult who takes courses for purely personal reasons--for recreation, to be with people, to find meaning. Few pursue degrees. Many actually have degrees but seek to reexperience the liberal arts now that they are "old enough" to appreciate them. In a sense they seek a liberal re-education. They seek to make more sense of the world, to find a framework within which to understand human history, to confront the big questions about the meaning of life. They are at a stage in their lives when it is important to find ways to integrate their own personal histories. In short, they are the kind of students humanists dream about encountering.

But too often, what we offer them trivializes our mutual aspirations. And appropriately the recreational courses we offer these adults are mocked by other educators and not funded by state legislatures. If among these students there are some seeking an integrated experience, we should respond with more than courses in social dancing and knitting. Why not a four course sequence in Western Civilization--"The Classical World," "The Middle Ages and the Renaissance," "The Making to the Modern World," and "Modern Times"?

Some would respond that these kinds of courses would never get off the ground--no one would enroll--even though we would love to teach them. That response presupposes a passive institutional role. If there are adults who are motivated as I have suggested then we need to develop the appropriate programs and make them known to these people.

Up to this point, most institutional marketing has been general--the institution itself is what we market. Only the most sophisticated colleges "segment" their potential student markets and then market directly to each of them. What I'm suggesting has its bottom-line side (more enrollments); but it also takes into consideration that the humanities, in their various forms, are the most powerful, most important kind of higher learning--and thus marketable. They are vital to people at all stages in their lives. They can help people transform their lives as they are the most practical and most transporting form of learning. That's what we should communicate. That's what we must "sell" to people.

I'm frankly tired of hearing all the moaning and groaning about the decline of the humanities and feeling the sense of powerlessness so many humanists express in the face of the "triumph" of career education.

Let's get off our you-know-whats and assert what we know--only the humanities can change people's lives.

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